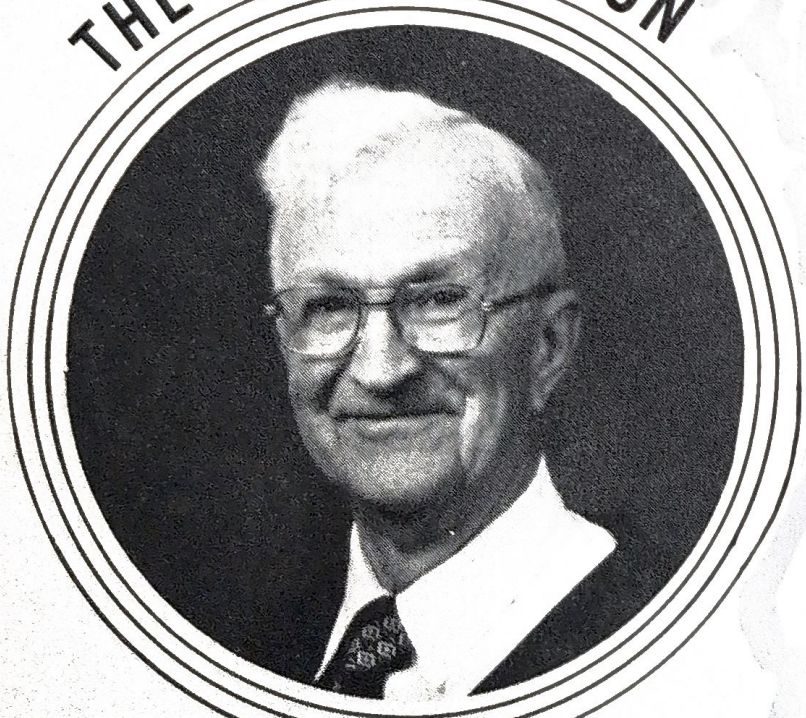
the romance of merchandising

1928 to 1976

48 years of good merchandising

THE EARL ROBSON DEPARTMENT STORE

THE EARL ROBSON STORY



EARL ROBSON HAS SAID:

"I knew what I wanted. I was so wound up that I had to succeed."

"I had faith and ambition. If hard work would kill anybody, I would have been dead long ago."

"I was willing to work and the good Lord seemed to guide the whole show."

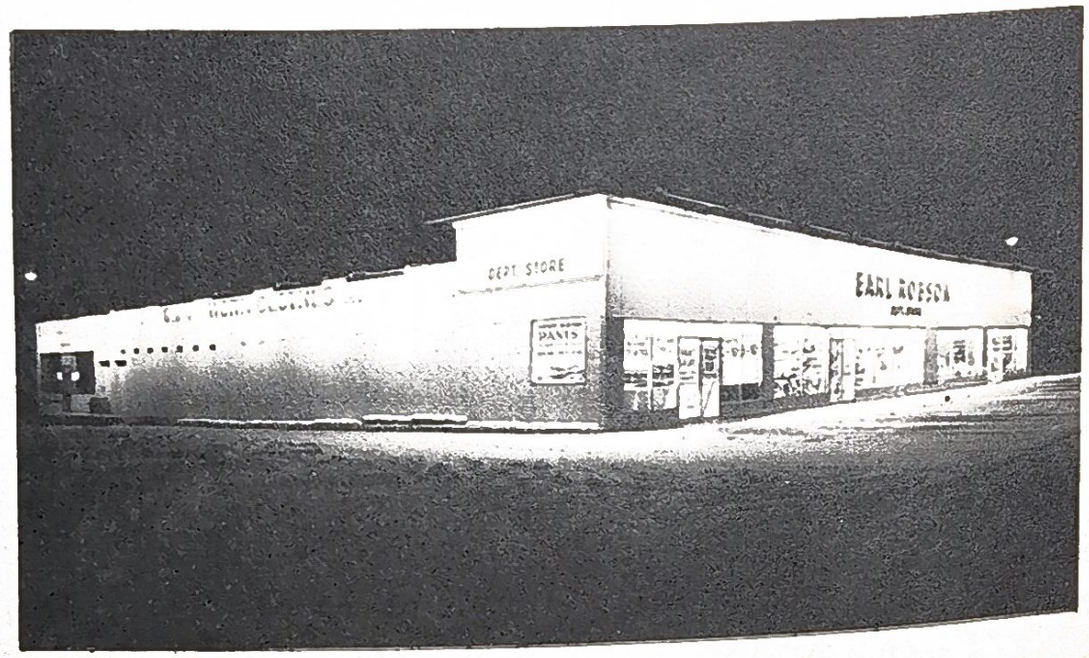
"You gotta GIVE before you can receive. Giving comes before getting."

"Nothing was ever made in vain. Somehow, sometime the person will come along to buy the merchandise."

"The good Lord blessed me with a good head for looking into the future."

"I have always been blessed by having the finest people around me."

"You can't walk and keep hypertension. If married couples would learn to walk, there would be fewer divorces."



THE ROMANCE OF MERCHANDISING

Historian – MILT EHLERT
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THE EARL ROBSON DEPARTMENT STORE
4339 S. DIVISION — HOME ACRES
WYOMING, MICHIGAN 49509

Earl Robson

The Poetry Corner

By Gladys Kooi Gritter

TO ROBSON'S ON THEIR 40TH ANNIVERSARY

When we moved here to Kelloggsville
some twenty years ago,
We asked our neighbors where they bought
their shoes and clothes, and so
They told us about a store
on Division Avenue
That was small, home-owned and neat.
reasonable and close by too.
They said, (and these neighbors were old
they'd traded there many a year)
"This place has quality merchandise
and clerks that are friendly, sincere."

Well, with that sort of build-up
we thought we had nothing to lose
And the very next week we went
to this store to get some new shoes.
Now, we've gone there for twenty years
and that's a pretty long while
We've found the owner of Robson's
has a heart as big as his smile.
So, from us, congratulations
to this home-owned department store,
We hope you'll stay in business
forty years more!

— With thanks to Mrs. Gladys Kooi Gritter.
Reprinted from the Southkent News Wyoming Advocate,
March 28, 1968

THE ROMANCE OF MERCHANDISING

On August 11, 1922, a young farm boy from Portland, Indiana, decided to better his lot in life. His name was Earl Robson. During the big railroad strike of that year, they were hiring farm boys to fill in for the workers in vital railroad jobs and Earl had an opportunity to go north to the metropolis of Western Michigan — Grand Rapids. Away he went, eager to pick up the wages offered, but also for one other reason. He hoped the Michigan air would be good for his hay fever.

The job proved to be steady. Earl worked at heavy machine forgings, meeting and mingling with a wide assortment of railroad workers. Yet somehow he was not satisfied; he could dream of something better for himself in life.

This young farm boy was following his own star. His ambition kept surging him forward, and somehow he could visualize a bright end of the rainbow out there "somewhere." His steps took him to Detroit in search of opportunity, but the milling thousands at the Ford plant filled him with sullen discouragement. Then, after working for Detroit Timken Axle for a time, running forging machines, he went back to Indiana for the summer.

In September that year (it was 1924), Earl went back to Grand Rapids. He entered Davenport Business College and, at the same time, obtained a job in a small clothing store. This was a significant day in his life. It was the old Sam Ragir Store in the Herkimer Hotel, and Earl's first task was washing windows.

But after a while his duties changed and then something important happened. He did some clerking and after he had made a sale or two, he suddenly declared: "This is it! *This* is what I want to do. Some day I'm going to have a store of my own and have five people working for me!"

Earl's first steady wage at Ragir's was $5.00 a week. He soon found an attic room to sleep in and then, ambitious for more education, commuted eight miles to attend business college, returning to work at the store after classes were over. Later, he would run home to supper a distance of a mile and a half (and he actually had to *run* to make it on time), then return to the store to work until closing time. Then, back home after work to study until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning.

Earl's apprenticing at Sam Ragir lasted three and a half years. It was valuable because he had to do everything – from sweep the floors on up. He even learned to keep the books. Since the job had great variety, Earl was sure it was giving him more experience than a big department store, where he could have earned more money. He was "on course" for his goal of having his own store, and he knew that all this was helping him.

By 1927, Earl, now working on a 7% commission, was earning somewhere around $28 a week. He married his wife, Ann, on October 6, 1927, and now he really needed the money. So, later on, when Ragir, to hold down expenses, tried to cut Earl's earnings, Earl said, "That's it!" He left his employer with the idea of getting a better job or, just perhaps, finding his own location and starting his own store.

At first, searching around Grand Rapids for a new clothing store location didn't bring much success. Finally, Earl had a tip that Home Acres – south of town at Division and 44th Streets – was badly in need of a men's clothing store. This was "way out in the sticks" at the time. Earl went out to look and found an old friend. There was his former barber, who was now the landlord of a small building with a portion available for rent.

The space for the new store could be rented at $35 a month and was compact, measuring 14 x 25 feet. Earl had hoped there would be living quarters at the rear, but this was not the case. To verify his inner feelings that this location would soon be "a-growing," he walked around to check with nearby merchants.

In fact when he went across the street to the drug store, one of these merchants gave him a hearty welcome. This was young Neil Shippy, then working for his brother and later to become owner of the Shippy Pharmacy, long a Home Acres landmark. "By all means come out here," said Neil. "We'll put you in business and help you get started."

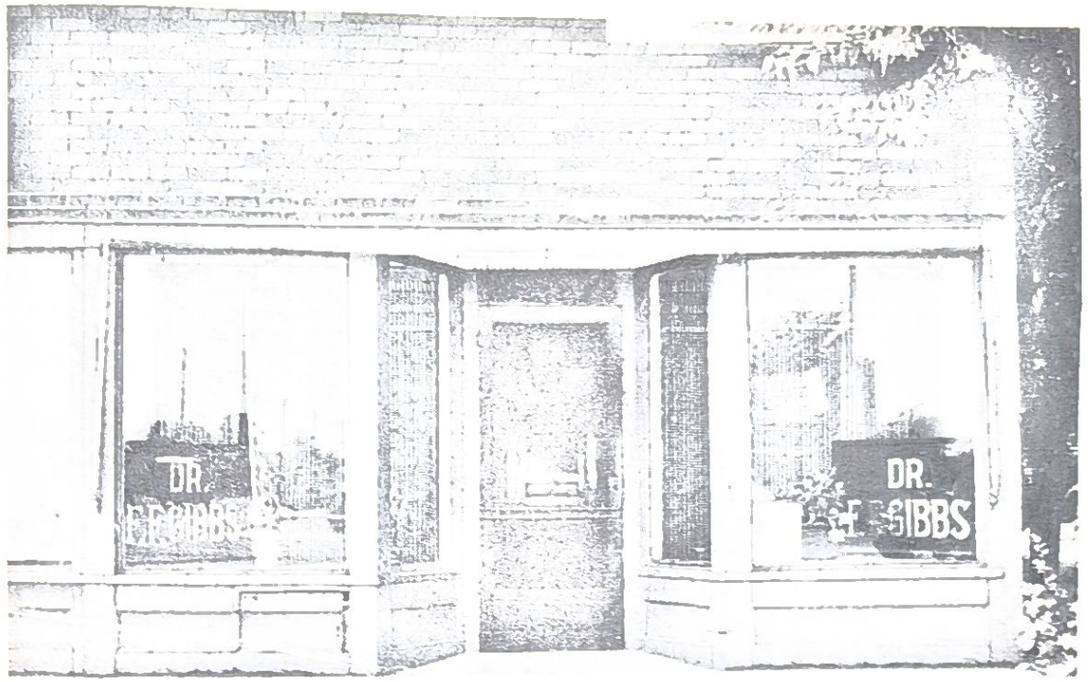
STARTING HIS OWN STORE!

So Earl rented the store and then had to scurry around to find a place where he and his wife could live. Not far distant, he found an upstairs living quarters in a house, and it looked adequate. The Robsons moved in. Earl set a date for his store opening – March 27, 1928.

Earl purchased some stock and did a little advertising for his retail debut. But all in all it was a modest opening, his total investment being $450.

Earl Robson's first day in business – he remembered it well – was a Thursday and things were awfully slow. No sales at all. The second day he made one sale and that was a pair of Jersey Gloves.

On the third day (Saturday), things changed for the better.



This is Earl's first store location in Home Acres, 4327 South Division. When this picture was taken, Earl had moved to another location just to the south, and Dr. Gibbs had established his office here.

Earl, looking across the street, could see Neil Shippy talking to an old gent in a Civil War uniform. Shippy had pointed to the new clothing store, and soon the man came over. Sure enough, he was a Civil War veteran named McAllister, and he bought a pair of pants, a pair of shoes and a black hat. This was the store's first major sale and the total came to nearly $10! By nightfall, Earl had made almost $39 in sales.

More business came in and Earl, who was not exactly finding things booming, was nevertheless able to stay in business and make a little money. He had "bird dogs" working for him and these friends helped a lot; besides Shippy there was his old barber landlord and other local merchants as well.

During that first year of 1928, Earl worked in some unique touches to expand his business volume. For one thing, he decided to do his own tailoring. At first he had been taking in tailoring, then carting it downtown and back for his customers. "But that got to be kind of heavy," in Earl's word. "My grandfather had been a tailor, and tailoring was in my blood." Soon he was able to teach Ann how to make cuffs, and she helped him in the store as they added repairing to tailoring.

About this time, Earl thought about installing a postal substation. He canvassed the home around Home Acres to determine demand. Finding it favorable, he added the substation and this brought in an additional $100 in revenue per year. Still another

addition was dry cleaning and he began to think that some day he would have a shoe repair department as well. Even in those days he would take in shoes that needed repair and tote them downtown as a special service to his customers.

In January, 1929, Earl ran his first really BIG ad: a solid page in the Burton Heights News. He still displays a well preserved copy of this ad.

Earl Robson did business in his first Home Acres location for about 18 months. In September, 1929, he completed arrangements to move about 65 feet south across Murray Street (then called Montrose Street) to a better location. The site, on Division a bit closer to 44th Street (then Dennis Street), was exactly where the present northeast corner of today's Earl Robson Store stands. In fact, the back wall of that original store stood where Earl's cash register is now!

DEPRESSION DAYS . . .

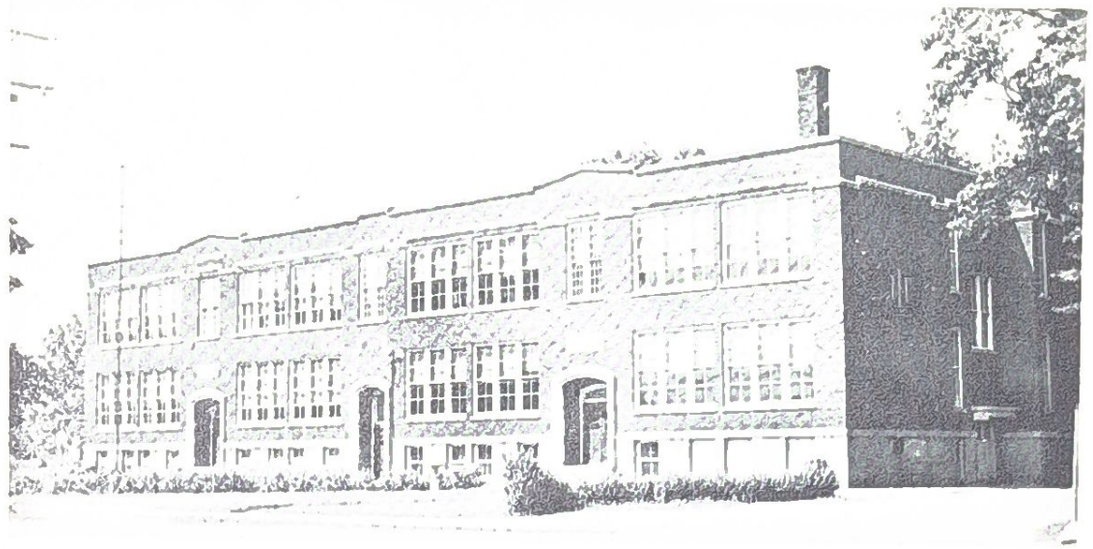
The arrangements were all set, but it was another thing to move in. Economic hard times struck — it was the start of the great depression — and business complications posed so many problems that the move couldn't be made until after Thanksgiving. Earl remembered sliding much of his stock and fixtures across the street on the ice. Finally, he was settled in his new store and ready for business.

It wasn't the best time to look ahead to profits and prosperity. The depression was causing widespread distress, and it was not limited to business problems. Earl and his wife had moved out of their upstairs flat and, to ease the financial burden, Mrs. Robson had moved in with her two sisters and her brother-in-law. But here there was no room for Earl. So . . . to be close to the job, he simply bunked in his store, making his bed on a cot under the wrapping counter. This situation lasted for about a year, and it was not until his sister-in-law got married and moved out that Earl could join his wife in a house. During much of this time Ann brought him his three meals a day in a basket.

But Earl Robson was not a man to let discouragement "sink" him. In his own words: "I knew what I wanted. I was so wound up that I had to succeed. I had faith and ambition. If hard work would kill anybody, I would have been dead long ago."

Generally, people didn't think the depression would last. It was considered a "temporary" situation, with few realizing that it would stretch on through the thirties.

In looking back, Earl remembered a lot of rough spots, with money tight and jobs disappearing. At the store, he managed to hold on, now with his press room plus dry cleaning and tailoring helping his overall efforts. About this time he paid $125 and then owned, by repossession, an old fashioned country dime store in



A Home Acres landmark, the old Kelloggsville School on South Division. (Frank Hunnes, a home town boy who stayed in his home community and worked his way up, is now school superintendent.)

Home Acres. With this acquisition he had about $1,000 to $1500 worth of merchandise, consisting of buttons, combs, needles and the like.

And then . . . Earl became a landlord. His building would accommodate a tenant and a little restaurant rented what is now "bay number 2," to the right of the present center post. Over the years, this spot would later house a grocery store, a hardware, and finally become a portion of Earl's store.

Times were dismal in the early 1930's. People would go to the township of Wyoming for welfare in droves. Basic needs had to be met, and so men would go out to Ideal Park to cut wood, later to be trimmed out and divided among the residents in need. Men were chopping all around the countryside and, with coal in short supply, the wood served an important purpose in starving off the cold for a number of depression winters.

Earl said, "I was willing to work and the good Lord seemed to guide the whole show." He had people plugging for him, as all the Home Acres merchants helped each other during hard times. There was a re-birth of the old barter system, with people often trading goods in place of money. They swapped for everything. People would come into the store and trade wood for shoes, pants, and other clothing items.

One thrifty Holland lady cooked up a big batch of sauerkraut and put it in 10-gallon crocks. She would trade that sauerkraut for merchandise.

Earl established store hours of 8 A.M. to 10 P.M. but in spite of this, business continued to be slow. The welfare lines stretched longer and longer; Earl recalled that you could rent almost any

In the early 1940's, Earl posed with some employees and friends, left to right: Sandra, Earl, Bonnie, Bernice Pierce, Herb Myrick (Earl's old barber and his original store landlord), Paul Greinke, Ann Robson and Rita Oriole.

sort of house for $5 a week. To boost morale and feed hungry citizens, Home Acres business men would stage free dinners in the Kellogsville gym. Sam Bravata was a mainstay here, furnishing hamburger and ground pork, while other merchants brought a number of food items. Ernie Hulsapple helped in the kitchen and Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Almy did the cooking. All the business men waited on table. Everyone enjoyed these gymnasium meals, which helped lessen the hunger pangs for one whole winter.

When the restaurant moved out, Earl had a new tenant — a grocery store. The manager of this was George Shippy, Neil's brother, who was Earl's brother-in-law. (He had married Earl's wife's sister.) Later, when George went into the oil business, Earl's wife and another brother-in-law ran the grocery store.

The belt-tightening days of the depression prompted Earl to display one of his proudest trademarks — his uncanny sense of *promotion!* He kept advertising as he could afford it and looked around for other ways to keep his name in front of the public. He was starting to be a real showman, too, and to show his flamboyance he rigged up an old Oakland Touring Car with a loudspeaker and drove around in a wide area, loudly "selling" his store.

One thing Earl had learned, and it was mighty important during these depression years: "You gotta *give* before you can receive." He was giving, for example, when he offered a surprising tailorshop service. If you bought a suit from Robsons, Earl would agree to keep it in good repair for a whole year. At that time a suit sold

for $25 to $35. Earl also agreed to press the suit you bought from him — FREE — every Saturday for an entire year.

The farmers liked another Earl Robson free service. If you bought work shoes from him, Earl would grease them every Saturday morning at no charge. Earl would chuckle in relating this: "I remember times when there would be 8 to 10 farmers lined up. I would throw newspapers down on the wooden floor, set a cookie can down and put my Neatsfoot Oil on it with a dauber. I'd get down and grease all the shoes. Do one, then holler, 'NEXT!' and daub him up. The farmers got a kick out of it. I had 'em talking about me, far and near." At that time Earl sold the finest work shoe you could buy at $2.98.

Another service you couldn't find anyplace else was Earl Robson's *free movies!* A unique promotional idea. Earl would rent films and show them in the basement of his store. This grew to be a big and popular pastime.

It seems that many folks of Dutch background who would never go near a regular movie theater *would* go to Earl's free movies. They would all crowd in and soon the fire department had the idea of shutting him down, being worried about fire safety in the "hall." But they couldn't have Earl arrested because he provided a non-paying amusement venture — not commercial in any way.

Later, Earl secured the Home Acres Hudson Garage for his movies, after buying a bigger projector. It was fun to watch the farmers arrive after they had forked over to share expenses for gasoline to get there. Many times you would see a packed carload, with kids on the running boards and even on the hoods.

To this day you can readily find people who relished going to the movies at Robsons. "That's where I met my wife," a man will say. Children and grandchildren of these early movie-goers still trade at the store!

Somewhat later on, Earl expanded into another entertainment "special." He built a platform in the back of his store and featured outdoor amateur shows. This, too, was a great thing for sagging morale and once again people came from far and near to see the amateurs. A young divinity student, Vern Hoffman, acted as Master of Ceremonies.

There was a hopeful sign when the national elections of 1932 brought Roosevelt to office. He inspired faith almost immediately and his economic projects, such as the W.P.A. and the C.C.C. put men back to work. The average family wage soon reached a level of $15 a week, and that was a lot in a day when you could buy a home for 6 to 7 hundred dollars.

Earl had sent shoes out for repair as a customer service but now he decided to promote a new in-store service. The man for

this, he decided, was a brother-in-law, and Earl talked him into installing shoe repair facilities. Then, with shoe repair, plus pressing, and tailoring all going well, Earl decided that one of his "extras" had to go. He elected to close down the postal substation.

It was a fortunate day for Home Acres when, in the early thirties, Dr. Gibbs moved in. He established an office in Earl's old store location. The doctor would become a staunch friend to Earl and the rest of the community. In Earl's words, "He fetched many hundreds of babies into the world."

BETTER TIMES A-COMING . . .

Business overall was improving as the thirties wore on, but some changes in retail practices had to be made. For example, Earl Robson found he would have to accept charge business – for the first time. Many W.P.A. workers, doing rough outdoor work, came in with no cash but with a great need for tough shoes and heavy work clothing. Robson was flexible enough to take on charge accounts. Most customers would later pay their honest debts. (Work clothing had, since the earliest days, been a mainstay of the Earl Robson trade.)

On August 8, 1934, Earl's oldest daughter Bonnie was born. One important outcome of this was that the Robsons decided, finally, to stop renting and buy a home of their own.

And then . . . there was another important turning point in the fall of 1936 when General Motors moved in, buying 77 acres and starting the erection of a plant just three fourths of a mile from Earl's store. It was noisy, as many old-time residents will remember, with the foundation crews working day and night driving piles. However, nobody complained because they all knew that this was the life blood of the community.

Earl got a boost from General Motors in an unusual way. The master mechanic on the construction job came in one day and sought to help his men get special credit on work clothing. His proposal was simple: he would send his boys over to the store, each with a slip of paper. Further, he would mark on the paper just how much credit that man was good for until next pay day.

This was a shot in the arm for business, and Earl followed his directives. The products they bought with their credit might be mud rubbers, winter caps, or heavy work trousers.

In 1938, a year of more business recovery, there was good news and bad for Mr. Earl Robson. On the good side, his second daughter Sandra was born. On the bad side, he found himself in some distress as a result of his too-generous tailor being over liberal in merchandising suits through a "suit club" and not charging the money that the suits were worth. Earl had not been watching this operation and soon found himself $9,000 in debt.

Then, too, it was the late 1940's that Earl called on contractor

This is the way the Earl Robson Santa Claus Parade came down the street in the late 1940's. Here they come!

Jim Weaver to construct a basement wall. Weaver didn't know it at the time, but this would be the first of many building projects he would do for the store in a long series of expansions. In speaking of their first meeting, Jim (who is called "The Mayor of Dutton" because of his high standing in that community) said that as he met Earl he called him "Mr. Robson." This was wrong – dead wrong – and it had to be "Earl" after that!

Soon Earl was catching up on his debt payments and even donating more liberally to schools and churches. Here again was the cheerful spirit of giving which had always characterized the man.

Earl now felt confident enough to expand his lines of merchandise in various directions, even buying out the stock of some smaller stores. He bought a shoe-patching machine, which he installed in his home. He also acquired a good sewing machine, and he and his wife would spend many nights working over distressed gloves and mittens to make them salable. He prepared many pairs of suede gloves for those who would not otherwise have been able to afford them. Once sold, he would get as much as $5.95 for the gloves.

Recovery was in the air. The depression, for all practical purposes, was over. Employment was steadily UP, and increasingly there was more money in circulation, a lot of it having been generated by the arrival of General Motors. By the early forties, times were getting abundant, and as the old song had gone, "Happy Days Were Here Again."

This is what the front of Earl's store looked like during World War II, with hundreds of pictures of servicemen on display.

THE WAR YEARS . . .

But now war drums were sounding and this did a lot to stimulate the economic upturn. War plants were springing up, and soon everyone seemed to have more money to spend. Earl was busier than ever at the store, getting his debts paid off, and by now he had a nucleus of valued employees. Some of them would be with him for a good long time.

Now the wartime forties were in full swing, and all the boys were off in the service of their country. One day at the store, a lady brought Earl a picture of her serviceman son in uniform. "Put it in the front window" ordered Earl. But one serviceman was lonely there, and soon the trend was started. Customers from far and near began bringing in pictures, while the front windows filled up with smiling faces of uniformed army, navy, marine, and air force personnel. On each picture would be entered the boy's name and address, as well as an address where he could be reached in the service.

When the front windows were filled to capacity, Earl made a count and found 2200 pictures of servicemen! He called the Grand Rapids Press, and a photographer came out and took a picture. The resulting story in the paper was great publicity, and there is no doubt this generated new business for the store.

Earl used to leave window lights on at night so that late-hour pedestrians would be able to scan the many pictures. However,

early morning light would fade the pictures so Earl, very willing to sacrifice his time, would come down in the middle of the night to pull an awning over them for protection.

When the war was over, the boys would come and retrieve their pictures. Of course, they didn't all come back, and Earl still has some of the photos. It was typical of Earl that, while vacationing in Traverse City one summer, he wrote a card to each of his "window servicemen."

AFTER THE GREAT WAR . . .

In the immediate post-war years, there were more turning points for the Earl Robson store.

For one thing, Earl got all his debts paid off and found that he had a clean slate.

Then there was the robbery! A man and woman had been "hitting" retail stores in a wide swath from Muskegon to Detroit. At Robsons they broke in with a crowbar one night and cleaned out $1700 worth of clothing and dry cleaning. Later, when a young rookie cop from Grand Rapids apprehended the couple at a house in Detroit, the place was jammed with merchandise from the couple's capers. Earl got about half of his goods back.

As in most adversity, here too there was a ray of sunshine. The Earl Robson store, featured in the newspapers because of the robbery, was immediately a center of attention; people came from all over to see the store which had been robbed by the famous couple. Earl figured that he got $5,000 worth of publicity.

When things settled down to normal, Earl looked around and realized he had a lot to be thankful for. The war was over, business was rolling, he had five clerks working for him and still good pressing and tailoring business. The shoe repair area had been phased out in 1942. Earl decided that he might think expansively and actually buy a car! (He had gone without one for many years, while building his business.) He had visions of driving down to Ohio and Indiana on buying trips.

Earl was still a living example of the principle: "you have to give before you can get." He followed this creed, in merchandising and in life, consistently donating to worthy causes and contributing his money and his time.

Jim Weaver, the contractor, told about the time that two ladies entered the store escorting a wheel chair patient. The man in the wheel chair was their father and they were buying a birthday present for him. "How about a nice sweater, Dad?" With high hopes, they looked at some sweaters and finally found a beautiful one that fitted their dad perfectly.

But the price dismayed them. "Well, that's a little more than we wanted to pay." Meantime, Earl, who had been watching all this with interest, quietly wrapped up the sweater and, smiling,

tucked it under the arm of the fellow in the wheel chair. He said, "Happy birthday Dad." There was no charge.

Weaver also remembered that when he was in the sixth grade at the Smith School on Wing Avenue, Earl Robson had just opened his store. Earl came to the school and knocked on the door. The teacher opened the door and there was an enthusiastic fellow who announced that he was Earl Robson and that he had just opened a new clothing store in Home Acres. He asked the teacher if he could have permission to give each one of the pupils a notebook and a pencil. Jim Weaver still owns that notebook, which has a picture of old radio stars Amos and Andy on the cover.

For many years after that, Weaver was a steady customer at the store, buying shoes and clothing from Earl. Somewhat later, he got his first contracting assignment – putting up that basement wall to block off the furnace from the stockroom in compliance with the fire inspector's requirements.

Later still, one of Jim Weaver's jobs was to rip the basement floor out, a slow process with a lot of digging involved. With all that nice dirt down there, Earl and Jim had an idea. They picked up some carrot seeds, plus radishes and lettuce and planted them in one corner. Strangely, their "underground garden" really flourished before the basement project was all done.

Jim Weaver expressed great thanks for the help and encouragement Earl had given him over the years. "He really gave me a boost. I was a young man and some things I had to learn the hard way. I'm grateful to him."

WITH MUSIC AND GOOD MERCHANDISING!

Earl would sometimes procure merchandise because he was sure someone, somewhere would get some good out of it. He often remarked, "Nothing was ever made in vain." Somehow, sometime, he felt, the person would come along to buy what he had, no matter how old or strangely styled it was.

And so the post-war "good business" era continued in full swing. The Earl Robson store now had ample floor area and business continued good. Back in the early forties, Earl had removed one wall as he absorbed the old grocery store (which had since become a hardware store) in the southeast corner of his building. It wouldn't be long, Earl thought, before he could add still another addition to his growing store.

In the late 1940's, a musical chapter was developing in the Robson family. His daughter Bonnie had studied accordion, starting with this instrument when she was 13 years old. Mrs. Robson, who had been a top piano player, soon picked up the accordion, followed by daughter Sandra. Now with three in the family playing the instrument, they became proficient together and got into some accordion bands.

Bonnie Robson (left) and Sandra Robson during accordion school days.

The three formed a unique combo and the Grand Rapids Press took their picture as the only mother-daughter accordion trio in the state of Michigan. This gave the store an additional flood of publicity. The trio became in high demand at weddings, conventions, and other events.

Sometime later, Ann and her two daughters opened an accordion studio, where lessons were taught. Earl helped finance this venture, offering accordion sales as well as music lessons.

Earl became an automobile owner on January 1, 1948. He purchased a new, four-cylinder Jeep (1948 model) and immediately started going back and forth to Portland, Indiana, the old home town. Earl's purpose was business. His brother was head shipping clerk at the Jay Garment Company, and Earl started to take advantage of the merchandise classed as "seconds," getting some fine buys with his brother's help. Soon he found it profitable to go down every two weeks. His stops became a routine: Portland, Versailles, Ohio and then Coldwater and VanWert, Ohio.

This routing made a 500-mile trip. It was tiring, but the many bargains would sell and profits were coming in. During these business swings, Earl always made it a point to stay with his mother in Portland for one night.

Thinking back to this time, Earl observed, "I was tough as iron; I sure could work." And he didn't slacken off his rigid schedule for with his traveling and the demands of the store, there was no end of things to do.

MANY YEARS OF SERVICE . . .

Earl was increasingly proud of his employees, having the luck to acquire loyal and, in many cases, long-staying helpers and associates. He fondly remembered those like Hattie Tanis, hired in 1944 during the war years. Hattie stayed about 8 years.

One employee who was hired about this time and proved to be a long-lasting addition was Lyle Converse, who answered an ad in 1949 while he was finishing up a sales course at Davenport Business College. He was just 21 years old. Although Lyle had considered taking a traveling job as a salesman, he decided instead to go out to Home Acres and apply for the job as manager.

But when Converse got out to Earl's store, he was not quite prepared for what he found. He was definitely *not* impressed with the store. He reflected: "This looks pretty much like a country store, basically a men's clothing store." It did have some women's items, but it was not too well departmentalized. For example, you might find ladies' "unmentionables" in one spot and right next to that a big table of men's work pants! In the shoe department, he found a small stock of basic types, heavy in work shoes. Downstairs there were men's work clothes in large stock – pants, shirts, bib overalls, coveralls, Levis and some odds and ends.

At that time, according to Converse's recollection, Earl had just bought out a small store in Rothbury, Michigan north of Muskegon. Much of his merchandise at that time seemed to come from buying "close-outs." All in all, Lyle found himself dismayed at the "country" atmosphere here. But one thing struck him. He *was* impressed with the smiling man who was going to be his boss for the next 26 years. "He impressed me as a very enthusiastic person, and I was much taken with his personality."

The first year he was there as manager, Lyle was surprised by a number of things. For one thing, there was the Santa Claus Parade, which was a yearly event. He thought that it was "an awful lot of money for a store this small to spend on such a promotion." Yet it certainly drew a lot of people. After the parade itself, Santa handed out bags of candy and peanuts to the kids behind the store. This was an institution at Earl Robson's for 13 years; Earl himself was Santa one year.

Lyle Converse did apply himself to what he considered some of the store's weaknesses, such as its lack of departmentalization. When he had been there three years, he had the satisfaction of seeing the business multiplied, as more lines were added and more organized retail strategies were put into effect.

Another long-time employee, Gladys Idema, was hired in 1947. Gladys well remembers her first day on the job – counting buttons at 45 cents an hour! She was at her lonely task all one afternoon and was "plenty scared" down in the basement . . . just counting

A happy group of ladies in the Robson shoe department in the early fifties: Left to right, back row: Mrs. Basin, Bert Smith, Beulah DeCamp, Char Snoeink, Gladys Idema, Gertrude Vanden Berg, Mrs. H. Barney, Owen Barney (Santa), Ethyl Ward. Front row: Signa Kenyon, LaVern Herp, Mary Huizenga, Bonnie (Robson) Murray, Jennette Heidenrich.

buttons! Her impressions of the store in those early days was blunt: "It was country-ish and kind of dumpy."

Of course, Gladys didn't stay at the button assignment long. She was promoted and became a valued member of the Robson team. Today she is in charge of ladies wear.

Dave Carpenter, the Robson shoe manager, was hired on his sixteenth birthday in 1952. His first day, he remembered, he talked to Earl about a job and the first thing he knew he was helping around the store but "didn't know he was working." But he, too, soon rose to a position of importance. Earl took great pride in the personal development of Dave at Robsons. "That job led to leadership and he became president of his school class, due a lot, I think, to his retail experience."

Another valued long-term employee, Irving Johnson, was hired in 1963. Irving started as an all-round stock man and janitor, but soon graduated to higher things. He acquired a good position in the Earl Robson work clothing department.

SOME "DOWNS" AND SOME "UPS" . . .

It was in the late 1940's that Earl suddenly was brought face to face with the fact that he had been working too hard. In 1949 his health broke down. Doctors advised him that he had a heart ailment, and they prescribed quiet and rest. Bedridden, he began a slow process of recovery. His brother-in-law, coming up from Indiana to see him, didn't help his morale any when he told him, "I don't think you'll ever come out of it."

Summer warmth in 1949 found a recuperating Earl Robson working in the 10-acre farm of his friend, Owen Barney, who lived out on Carlisle Road. (Owen had been one of Earl's Santas.) Along with this, he got interested in organic dieting when another friend of his, Sam Stanky, gave him a magazine on organically grown foods. He started on a high vitamin diet, with the blessing of Dr. Gibbs, who was watching the whole affair with a benevolent eye.

At the farm, Earl remembered, "All I did the first year was kill the crab grass." But he bought a tractor and farm tools. Little by little, he was regaining his health. His organic gardening would go on for several years, and when he was through he would have a five acre garden although, as Earl commented, "I never sold a penny's worth – gave it all away."

As his strength returned, Earl put more and more time in at the store. Business was holding up well, with now about 15 employees.

One merchandising event that happened about this time was the putting out of goods on consignment in other stores. Earl eventually had five small "branches," selling for him on consignment, spread around western Michigan.

In 1950, it was the 22nd anniversary of Earl's first store, so he decided to celebrate by ordering a HUGE 400 pound cake from Muller Bakeries. No false front; this was ALL CAKE! Lyle Converse recalled that it cost over $500, and he was duly shocked at this expense. For the party, many well-wishers and local dignitaries came in, enjoying coffee, and a piece of the huge cake.

At this time, along with the amateur shows and movies, Earl was also featuring live bands, which played every Wednesday night. The conservative nature of Lyle Converse was disturbed. "Earl was a promotion-minded man. And it was costly." But Lyle and Earl together formed a sort of "team" – the cautious manager and the promotion-minded owner. Together, they had teamwork which made the early fifties a profitable time.

One consignment store on Chicago Drive was one they had high hopes for. But it was a loss item, with a low volume and too many costs. Although Earl gave significant help to other merchants in his consignment dealings, generally these ventures were not profitable to him.

But merchandising at the main store took some fancy turns. For years, Earl would chuckle at how he became the "footwear king" of Western Michigan." He would take a load of Ball Band footwear and place it on the sidewalk at his front door. There were 200 cases of footwear out there when the store closed at night.

Then . . . during the night, Earl would "sneak" over and rearrange the boxes to make it look like a brand new shipment!

The next night he would do the same thing. He would wheel

A group picture about 1952. Left to right, back row: Bill Slager, Bill Pope, Henry Alkema, Mr. Blodgett, John Visser, Bob Jenkins, Lee Heidenrich, Jim Arbing, Clarence Barrett, Dave Carpenter, Doug Burwell, Fred Bellis. Front row: Roy Quay, Charlie Simons, Lyle Converse, Santa (Owen Barney), Ed Berzins, Earl Robson.

Long a friend and neighbor of the Earl Robson Store, druggist Neil Shippy prepares to cut the huge 25th anniversary cake (1953).

all the rubbers back out and set them in front in a different way, making it look as though he had still another shipment. He kept this up for 3 or 4 days and folks thought he had a monopoly on all the Ball Band footwear in Western Michigan. But it was the same 200 cases each time. "That stunt put me in the footwear business in high gear."

Sometime before the big footwear incident, Earl had worn the crown as "king of Western Michigan cap merchandisers." About 1949, a cap salesman, Martin J. Post, helped Earl break records in the selling of headgear. Mostly, Earl would buy his closeouts. Sadly enough, Post was later injured in an automobile accident and from this experience he went blind. But you couldn't hold down a man of his spirit and he secured a job selling candy in the downtown Grand Rapids Post Office. Earl kept in touch with him, "as fine a man as you would ever meet," and Mr. Post remained a favorite person in the Earl Robson circle of friends.

Lyle Converse liked to re-tell some of the stories of this era. When Earl made his buying trips to Ohio and Indiana, for example, he would come back with a loaded Jeep and back it up to the front door. Unloading had to be done right away, and the store crew hated to see that merchandise coming in. They would sigh, knowing that it would make a big mess before the job was done.

In the unloading process, overalls and work clothing would be piled on top of the Robson sport shirts and dress shirts, and the compression would "squish" all the collars down.

Lyle also recalled the time a "too sharp" salesman from New York came around with a big load which he was offering at a bargain. The merchandise? Rubber balls! The fast-talker was lavish in his complimentary remarks and, said Lyle, this should have tipped Earl off. But somehow the sale was made and Earl Robson became the proud owner of a great quantity of rubber balls. The salesman had told him, "You can sell out and make a killing."

Earl was kidded about the many bags of "potatoes" which he had for a long time. They never did move the rubber balls.

FORGING AHEAD IN THE FIFTIES . . .

Hopes were high in the 1950's; it looked like good business ahead for the store. Of course, the shoe department had to be enlarged, and Earl was hesitant to put in the new shelves which were so sorely needed; somehow he felt he might scare away his old customers if it appeared that he was too prosperous. Finally, the important remodeling was done, and the shoe department continued to show a good profit.

During the early forties, Earl began expanding his contacts

A smiling group of Robson ladies about 1958. Left to right: Myra Kietzman, Gertrude Vanden Berg, LaVerne Herp, Sandra Robson, Geneva Young and Gladys Idema.

all through the state. He joined the Michigan Association of Merchants and this, he found, gave him greater buying power statewide. He also found pleasure and new contacts in the U.S. Hay Fever Club! In this organization, the enthusiastic Mr. Robson became a national president. The club would meet in Richmond or Muncie, Indiana or perhaps in Traverse City.

By associating himself with the Hastings Cut Rate Store, Earl could buy shoes in carload lots. His buying power was also increased when friends would sometimes "split" on a shipment with him. Henry Alkema of Grandville, well known merchant and Grandville's first Mayor, helped in this regard, buying big stocks of shoes jointly with Earl.

With progress and the widening of the streets in Home Acres, Earl saw that he might lose his on-street parking. He promptly bought two lots in back of his store. Whenever he did such things, Earl was confident that he was acting wisely: "The good Lord blessed me with a good head for looking into the future."

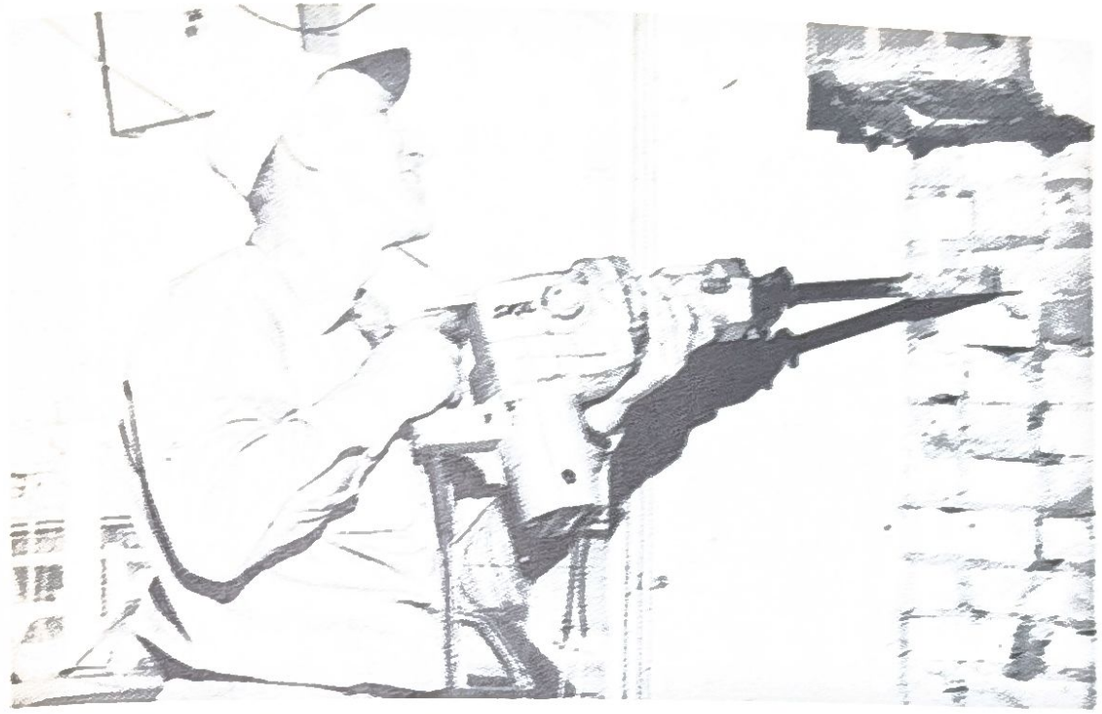
In 1953, Earl decided he would outdo the 400 pound cake he had had on his 22nd anniversary. It was his *25th* — and he ordered a 445-pound cake.

And this one, again, was *all cake!* "Not like other stores which faked it sometimes with a hollow cake." Old friends and dignitaries helped him celebrate, with picture-taking and congratulations. Jobbers and suppliers dropped in from Detroit and other places, as a happy time was had by all.

Interestingly enough, Earl's suppliers, seeing that he was a promoter, kept him more readily in mind when it came to future closeouts and special buys on various items. He was also finding that now he could get better quality merchandise — more desirable to the customer and more profitable to the store. This he could not have done in the early years.

Earl's health, as the 1950's progressed, was steadily improving by virtue of a unique Robson exercise: walking. It was partly Earl's determination to prove he had recovered from his breakdown of 1949. First he went around a few blocks, then found it invigorating and kept up the practice. But — Earl had to do his walking at night. It was not a common activity, and people would "look strangely" at you if you walked in the daytime!

Expansions continued at the Earl Robson store. It was in the mid-fifties that Earl ordered the removal of a partition which had stood in his original building since 1929, thus creating a much larger store area. Then too, he opened his parking lot from Murray to 44th, all the way across. When black-topped, this gave the store considerably more parking area. For the dedication of his new parking lot, Earl staged another good promotion — he auctioned off a horse. A crowd of thousands was on hand, with entertainment,



Contractor Jim Weaver with an electric hammer in 1956, taking the wall out between Earl's store and the Ace Hardware.

for this unusual event.

CITY COMMISSIONER EARL ROBSON . . .

Business continued good as Earl's health continued to improve. The 1950's wore on. It was a time when Wyoming would mature into a city. It had been a township of only 18,000 people when Earl started, this including the village of Grandville. (Grandville later became a city during the depression and this removed a good chunk of area from Wyoming.)

It was in 1959 that an all-important vote was taken which made Wyoming into a city. One day Earl's friend, Bill Doorn, a Wyoming booster, came into the store. "I'm going to run you for Commissioner of the First Ward," said Bill.

Earl thought a moment. "I don't have the time to run for it. I'm not going to spend a penny to get elected."

"Never mind," said Doorn. "We're going to put you on the petition. You don't have to do anything."

Doorn's predictions were right as Earl, without making any effort to acquire the office, was elected by a huge majority. It was the start of his tenure as city commissioner, and he would serve nine years and five months.

So the decade of the fifties ended up in a flurry of activity both for Earl and for his store. In 1958, Earl called on his old friend Jim (Mayor of Dutton) Weaver for another job, this one being a brand new store front. In 1959, Weaver responded again with a 13-foot expansion to the rear and the addition of a new wall. The

The "lifeline" water pipe from Lake Michigan to Wyoming was just getting under way when the city council posed in March, 1965. Top: Mayor Ed Wiest and Commissioners Earl Robson and Jack Magnuson. Bottom: Commissioners Ray Boes, Neal Veenendall and Tom Eardley. (Missing from picture: Lou Vos.)

former alley was now a part of the growing building. The way things now looked (with a new furnace installed), this gave 13 more feet, upstairs and down.

At this time, along with everything else, Earl's fondness for walking was keeping him active and feeling great. He took a number of short and medium length walks to such places as Wayland, and usually could talk someone into going along with him.

And the new commissioner was busier and busier. There were probably 90 to 100 meetings a year during Wyoming's first years of existence. Roads, streets, and sewers had to be built. Earl took pride in his active role in the new community. A pipeline was proposed from Lake Michigan, although this would not actually happen until 1966.

SAILING INTO THE SIXTIES . . .

With the dawn of the 1960's it looked like more good business ahead. Earl called on contractor Jim Weaver to take out another wall and also to enlarge the basement. At the same time, important things were going on upstairs. With "sta-pressed" fabrics so much on the market, it was finally decided to discontinue pressing operations in the store, to the relief of many of Earl's clerks. Now things would be cooler without the steamy press in operation.

Earl's buying trips were numerous in the early sixties. He estimated that in a 20 year period, he hauled 351 loads of goods. He would make an Ohio trip in one day, even though it was 500 miles. His load was all ready for him, and by simply spending six or seven minutes loading, he would be back on his way to Michigan. Earl remembered that traveling men, jobbers and manufacturers all seemed to *want* to help him. "It was probably because I was willing to work," he said.

But there was a little more to it than that. The Robson spirit of cordiality and optimism would draw others to him. He had a "success consciousness" in his decidedly positive attitude from the beginning.

At this time, Earl was moving out of the consignment store business. There was just not enough profitability in consignment operation.

But as things were consolidated back at the main store, it was time for more expansion. Earl called on contractor Weaver again: "Go get your shovel!" This time (it was 1963), Earl decided he would expand on the southwest corner with the addition of a men's work clothes shop. Three years after that, Earl acquired the Ace Hardware location (site of the old grocery store) and this too added many extra square feet of floor area.

THE "WALKING AMBASSADOR" OF WYOMING

The curtain was rising on a bright new chapter of Earl Robson's career — a great mixture of promotion and exercise. His walks were becoming hikes of fantastic proportions!

Earl's first truly ambitious walk came in 1964. Joined by a half dozen others, he chose as his starting point, Ontario, Canada. The group gamely kept it up, going south and finally arriving in Richmond, Indiana, 519 miles away. Invigorating . . . and full of fine companionship, this experience left Earl permanently *sold* on the virtues of long-distance walking.

On one memorable vacation trip, Earl had visited Norton, Virginia. While in this colorful mountain and coal country, he had been entertained by the internationally known "Bearded Beauties," this being a Lions Club group which sang and acted in hillbilly garb and mountain style, complete with beards, jugs, etc.

Publicity-minded Earl saw the value of bringing this group, about three dozen in number, back to Wyoming. Once back home, he had to do a selling job on Mayor Joe Kolderman, commissioners and merchants to convince them that the publicity would mean a lot, both commercially and otherwise to the new city of Wyoming. But Earl was successful and later, with a group which included Harvey DeBruyn, Charlie Vaughn and others, journeyed down to Virginia and made arrangements to bring the "Bearded Beauties" up to Wyoming the following year.

The hillbilly group was a smash hit when they arrived in Home Acres in the spring of 1961. They put on their capers and local merchants made the most of it with sidewalk sales. Earl himself took in over $9,000 in a three day sidewalk sale as, all in all, it was a gala occasion, with one estimate figuring the crowd at about 25,000 people.

THE BIG WALK TO VIRGINIA . . .

Now Earl had a great idea. He decided to repay the visits *on foot* to show his appreciation for what the "beauties" had done.

When Earl had been in Norton, one city commissioner down there had made a remark which he couldn't forget. The man had said, "Why you'll never amount to anything up there in Michigan. Two hundred years ago when the state of Virginia owned Michigan Territory, we gave you back to the Indians because we knew you'd never amount to anything." Earl had decided that some day he would make that fellow eat those words.

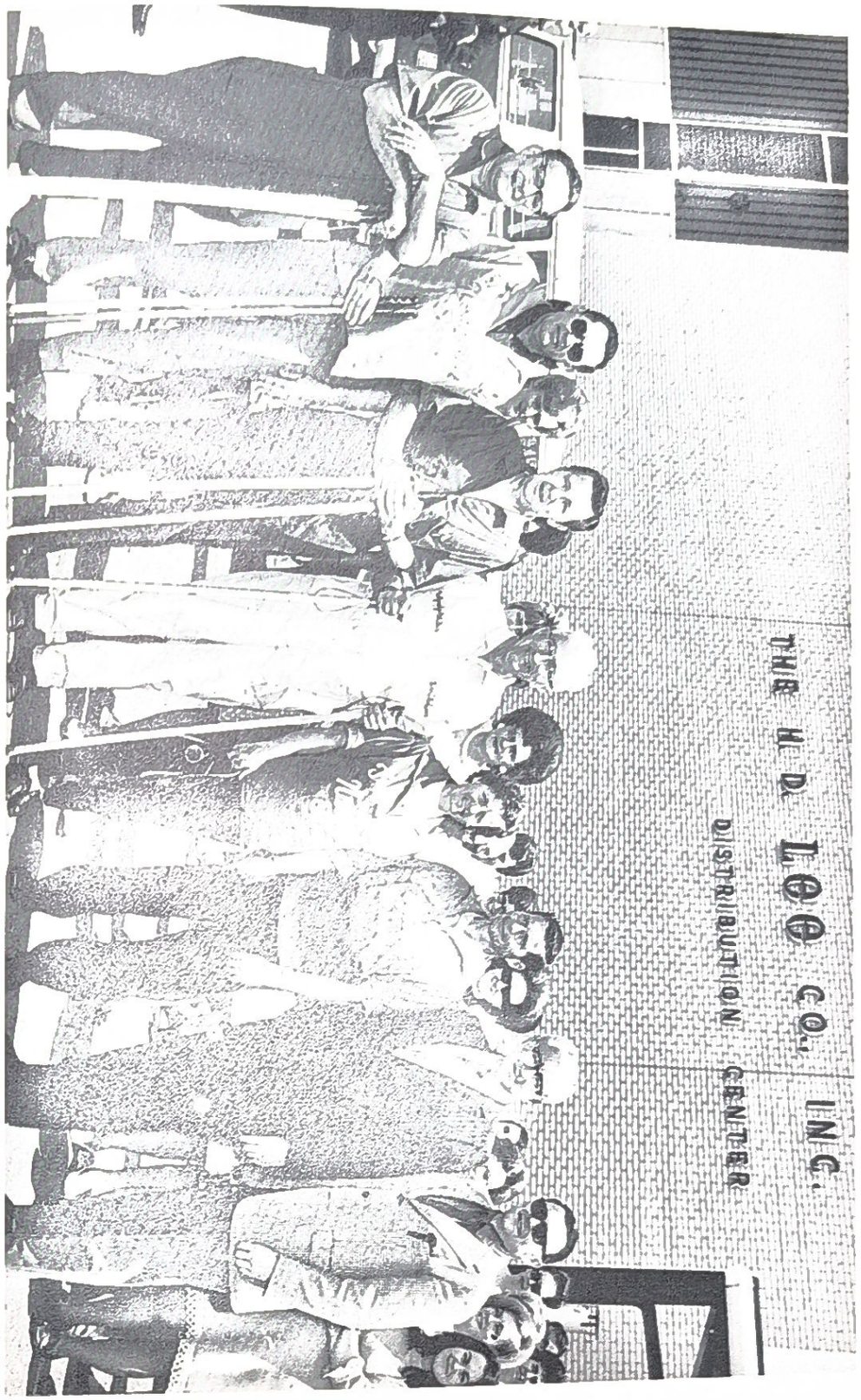
So . . . Earl, in 1966, teamed up with Fred LaVene, an old friend, and the two made up their minds to walk to Virginia and show them a thing or two. Fred, retired owner of a salvage auto parts store in Grand Rapids, was then well past normal retirement age, and a year older than Earl. It was Friday, May 28, 1966 when the two got started.

The walkers had an escort, a panel truck driven by a honeymooning young couple from Home Acres. They would scout ahead, looking for the best overnight stopping places and would also watch over the hikers and stand by to pick them up in case of bad weather.

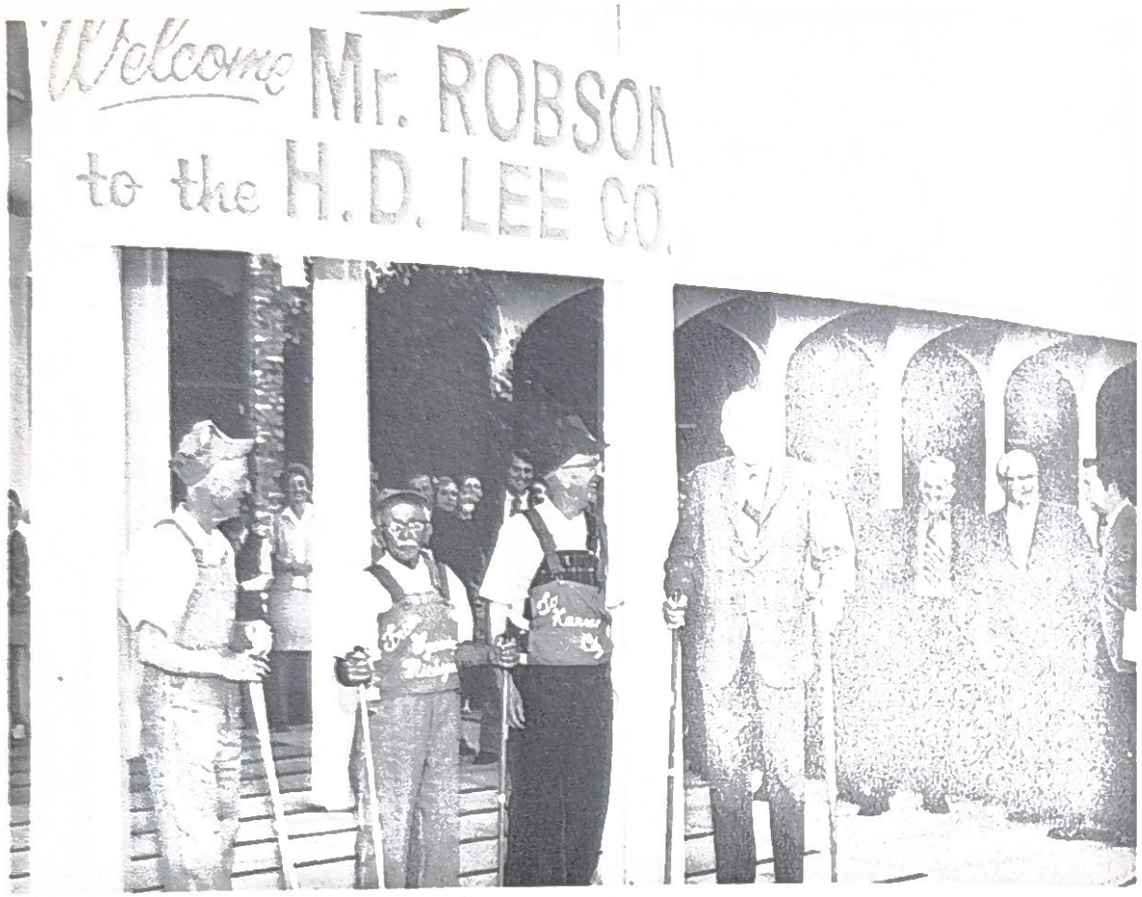
This walk was significant in many respects. There was medical trouble – Earl suffered a "dropped shoulder" and a sprained back. And Fred had his troubles too. But they kept going. In fact, when they both became sore and lame, they devised a new walking system. After experimentation, they determined that using two chest-high walking sticks gave a boost to their mileage and was less tiring.

Earl figured that the walking sticks took 25% of the walker's bodyweight, definitely a big help. On the Norton walk, the sticks helped the men gain seven or eight days from their schedule. Normally, Robson and LaVene found they could average about 20 miles a day. Under ideal conditions they could make as much as 28 miles per day.

And so the two spry oldsters walked every step of the 650 miles to Norton – except for a five mile lift by the police in Cincinnati. The escorting honeymooners were temporarily "lost" and the Cincinnati cops wouldn't let the two men go through the downtown part of the city, including the Ohio River bridge, claiming it was



From Wyoming, Michigan to Nashville, Tennessee. Earl poses with admirers in front of the H. D. Lee Distribution Center. (Earl is fourth from the left.



This was in 1971 when Earl walked to Kansas City from Wyoming, and visited the H. D. Lee offices at Shawnee Mission, Kansas. Left to right: Harry Trute, Fred LaVene, Earl, Leonard Staples (H. D. Lee president).

too dangerous.

Finally came the culmination of the long trek and the "Wyoming Walkers" were greeted as heroes in Norton. Now they had to wait ten days for the staging of the big ceremony of welcome, and by that time they were joined by Mayor Wiest, Tom Eardley, Les Kimball, Charlie Vaughn, and others. There was a big parade, followed by welcoming speeches. Among the assembled dignitaries was the Governor of Virginia.

It was at this point that the lawyer who had made the disparaging remarks about Michigan was proud to take it all back. Getting on the microphone, he saluted Earl and Fred: "There hasn't been anything like this since Lewis and Clark."

Of course, when Earl got on the mike, he issued the lawyer, Mr. Honeycutt, an open challenge to return the feat by walking, with stout Virginia companions, to the Michigan Capitol at Lansing. Although his suggestion was applauded, the challenge went unaccepted.

Earl now established the practice of making at least one long walk every year. He also found himself getting famous. Folks

would come around to point out the "Wyoming walker" and take pictures of him, and mothers would tell their kids, "There's Earl Robson, the man who walks." There was newspaper publicity too, as Earl found himself featured again and again. In a way, he paid for this good "press" — Earl figured that his now famous walks cost him about $1.25 to $1.50 per mile.

GOOD BUSINESS AND GOOD WALKING . . .

In May, 1969, Earl resigned from the Wyoming City Commission. He wanted to devote more time to business as well as to his walks. He also wanted relief from the stress and agitation which, Earl was quick to admit, was a part of all city politics.

Earl now made a major purchase of property and was able to square off his land on Division and Murray Streets. He had 120 feet of frontage on Division and 153 feet of depth. Later, he added about 80 feet in the back, and in 1970 he made an important addition which connected the main store with the work clothes area at the south side, thus squaring off the building. The upstairs offices were put in at the same time.

It was in 1970 that Earl's walking buddy, Fred LaVene, stayed home, but Earl sauntered 500 miles to Nashville, Tennessee. Upon arrival, he was given a warm welcome by company officials at the H. D. Lee Clothing Outlet. (Earl had handled this line successfully for many years.)

In '71, joined again by Fred, Earl set off for Kansas City, Missouri. The two hoped to stop at Independence to visit former President Harry Truman, himself a seasoned walker. Unfortunately the 80-plus year old Truman was not up to seeing visitors, but he later sent Earl a sincere letter of regret. Earl and Fred completed this jaunt by making one productive side trip, visiting the H. D. Lee plant and home offices in Shawnee Mission, Kansas.

Earl and Fred now had a valuable escort on their long trips, this being a panel truck driven by a Muskegon man, Harry Trute. Harry, like Earl and Fred, was well past normal retirement age. He would cruise ahead, looking for the best overnight stopping places. His panel truck carried 800 pounds of supplies including six extra pairs of shoes for each man; and being easily available to the hikers at any time, served as a handy refuge in case of bad weather or emergencies.

If the walkers were approaching a town at nightfall, Harry would come out to get them and drive them the rest of the way. But next morning he would take them back to their stopping place so they could start from where they left off.

In 1972, Earl and Fred walked to Alpena, Michigan for the Fourth of July celebration and Strawberry Festival, covering the 275 miles in 13 days. In addition to all his longer walks, Earl had

In 1972: Three of Earl's long-term employees, store manager Lyle Converse, men's work clothes manager Bob Jenkins, and Harold Brockway, in charge of wholesale department.

been making annual strolls to Traverse City at Cherry Festival time. This he classified as a "short walk" – under 200 miles. A high point of this trip each year was Earl's appearance in the Cherry Festival Parade.

It was in 1973 that Earl decided to visit his old boyhood home at Portland, Indiana. He stirred up his walking partner again and off they went. At this time Earl was 74 and Fred LaVene was 75. This trip was made in a crisp fall setting in October, 1973 and the two young-at-heart business men walked the 202 miles in 11 days.

By 1974, Earl figured he had walked a total of about 7,000 miles and he reflected that he had never, in all that time, met any rough-spoken people anywhere. "You meet the grandest people," he stated, "and there's never a dull moment on a walk. Every quarter mile there is something or somebody interesting. Others will come out to meet us or go along a ways." By his own reckoning, about 1500 stories had featured him in various newspapers across the country.

Earl had also developed a philosophy about his walking: "You are never too old to walk. And it's amazing what it will do for you. A long walk keeps you healthy for about 11 months. You can't walk and keep hypertension. If married couples would learn to walk, there would be fewer divorces."

REFLECTING BACK . . .

While Earl was never one to dwell on nostalgia, there were certain things about his store which made him extremely proud. For one thing, there was the small core of employees that had been with him a long time. He could count 5 or 6 people that had been with him for over 20 years. He also estimated that there had been

some 45 of his past employees who had passed away.

The Earl Robson Store listed, by the mid seventies, some 50 people (part time and full time) on the payroll. "My payroll each week today is bigger than a year's business in the first four or five years," said Earl. In those days if he could do $800 in the months of January, February and March, he was doing well.

It was a real triumph when he got the store volume up to $75,000 a year. Earl had a friend in Traverse City who was doing that much, and so he wanted to do the same. Later he reached and passed $75,000 and set a goal of $100,000. Later goals, set and reached, were well above that!

"As I look back over the 48 years," said Earl, "anticipation was greater than realization. But I have always been blessed by having the finest people around me.

"The younger help of today," he continued, "have grown up in another era and have never been weaned on hard work. When I was five, I had to get up and milk two or three cows every morning and night. In some ways, younger help today don't know what work is."

Earl had vivid memories of the time he first came to Grand Rapids during the railroad strike of 1923. Living among those men, some of whom were murderers, vagrants, and robbers, was quite an experience. But when those motley railroad workers found that Earl had strict morals, never drinking, smoking or swearing, the most hard-nosed criminals were the ones who tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Young farmer boy, you stick to it!" Earl knows that his moral values, ingrained into him from earliest years, have been guiding lights as he has grown and prospered.

Also, Earl Robson pays great tribute to his father and mother and brothers and sisters. "In this fast world, we forget to count our blessings and pay our respects to those people who help us. My father and mother taught me how to work – and taught me that work was honorable. I guess that explains a lot of my success because I was willing to pay the price of work. Yet I always had that Divine faith, that guidance from the good Lord above, even in the darkest days. And he never let me down."

Earl remembered the high standards of value instilled in him by his school, his community, and his home life. Perhaps this is one reason he always liked to keep in touch with old friends and neighbors, going back to see the many people who had given him a lift in life.

But if there were others who helped Earl, it is even more true that Earl, through his care, concern, sharing, giving – plus genuine help and affection for others – helped countless other people for a long period of years.

Lyle Converse, store manager since 1949, had some warm words for his boss after 26 years:

"It has been a real pleasure to have spent these 26 years with Earl. I'm sure that Earl is proud of what he has done through the years and I think we're all proud of him. The help here will long remember all the experiences and the things that Earl has done. I think that we're all better people for knowing Earl Robson."

Gladys Idema, manager of ladies wear, has been with Earl since 1947. "You know," said Gladys, "in June of this year (1975) I completed 28 years at the Earl Robson Department Store. And in all that time, Earl and I have yet to have the first cross word between us. As far as I am concerned, Earl is the finest man I've ever known. My work here has always been very enjoyable."

Dave Carpenter, with Earl since 1952 and now manager of the shoe department, spoke out as follows:

"Every day, since the first day I started, Earl was always enthusiastic. No matter how rough times were, he always looked on the bright side.

"He never lost his enthusiasm. If everybody used that philosophy, the whole world would be much better."

Irving Johnson, with Earl since 1963 and a strong right arm in the work clothes department, echoed the same feelings:

"I would say that I have enjoyed myself working for Mr. Robson. He is a nice man. When I started at the store, I had no experience at this type of work, but he was willing to allow me a chance. I started in the stock room, but one day he said, 'I've got a better job for you.' He gave me a chance to improve myself. I would say this: Thanks to Mr. Robson."

Lon Lilly started working for Earl Robson in 1959 as his gardener. As of this date (1975) Lon was Earl's men's wear manager, and had some interesting recollections:

"Many changes have taken place at the store since I started. New faces, additions, and familiar faces now gone have been part of that changing scene.

"One of Mr. Robson's favorite and famous events was his sidewalk sales. Lots of effort on everyone's part went into making these sales the successes they were. It was like turning the store inside out at special bargain prices. Tables, racks, boxes and backs all felt the strain, especially if mother nature didn't cooperate.

"Mr. Robson's intense enthusiasm has certainly been an integral part of this store's growth, and I am proud to be a part of it."

Myra Kietzman worked for Earl in 1934, '35 and '36 (part time) while going to Kelloggsville School and then to Godwin, where she graduated in 1936. She remembered that the store in those early days was small, with the grocery store on one side. Earl had a grand total of two employees! Myra recalls:

"We knew about everyone who came into the store."

Myra returned to work for Earl on a full time basis in 1957 and she has been there ever since. By 1975, her job was buyer in the boy's department. Here are some of her interesting memories, gathered over the years:

"Earl has been and always will be a promoter. He is truly a working man's friend—always on their level.

"A lot of people will always remember our Santa that we used to have (Mr. Owen Barney). A lot of children thought of him as the real Santa.

"The one thing I remember most about remodeling was the big basement project. The old cement floor was taken out to put in that new basement and we worked on dirt floors. It sure was a dirty mess, but we had lots of fun.

"I can remember when we had 2 employees, and now we have 50. It sure is a good place to work, and Earl is just great to work for."

Mary Meulenberg started working for Earl in March, 1954, and she was first assigned to the annex across the street from the main store. This annex was called the "dump 'em Out" store, because it was here that big loads of factory test garments would be dumped out, to be worked over in the tailor shop which was also in this building. When Mary was first hired, she looked over in the corner and saw a huge truckload of overalls and jeans in a pile. She thought: "My goodness, what am I getting into?"

But Mary went to work, repairing the test garments to get them ready for sale. The man who showed her the ropes was Ed Berzins, who knew all the tricks about tailoring and alterations. Later, Earl would sell the overalls at 97 cents apiece.

Mary soon lost her fears about the job and became a happy and enthusiastic employee. Except for 5 years away from the store, she has worked for Earl in his tailoring operation continually since 1954.

Bob Jenkins, manager of work clothing at the store, was able to look back fondly at his 23 satisfying years with the Earl Robson Department Store:

"I was temporarily laid off from the factory and instead of drawing unemployment, I took a job selling Fuller Brushes. Mary Richards and her husband ran a service station where I bought my gas. Mary, a customer of Earl's, knew I was looking for better work, so she told Earl about me and he arranged a job interview. It was January, 1952.

"I was immediately impressed with Earl. I started on a part time basis at his Chicago Drive Store and very quickly found that I liked the retail business much more than any other work I had done. I kept selling Fuller Brushes for a while and later went back to the factory for a time, but in 1954 I went to work for Earl full time. I needed the job security the store offered and was thankful for the opportunity for advancement. The business was growing and I liked being a part of it.

"Over the years, I believe that Earl's stamina and foresight have been the deciding factors in the growth of the business from a country store to the full sized department store we have today. He has had a lot of good, faithful help in Lyle, Dave and many others, but I feel his leadership in both the business and community has been an example for others to follow.

"I've seen most all the growth and expansion of the business, and I am grateful to Earl that he gave me a chance, in the beginning, to be a part of it."

Martha Mitchell, the former manager of the tailor shop, had this to say: "I have known Earl since 1929. I started working for him in 1964 and worked for ten years at the store. I surely enjoyed working there and he is such a nice person. All the time I was there, we never had any spats. I retired from the store with a good feeling for everybody."

Martha's daughter, Lillian, worked at Earl Robsons for almost ten years, and she also had very happy regards for Earl and the store.

Charley Vaughn, editor of the Southkent News and an old friend of Earl's, said this:

"Earl Robson has been a fantastic success by using his own homespun, unconventional methods of promotion.

"When he opened his store in 1928, he couldn't reach all the people by conventional advertising so he bought a lot of pencils and notebooks and went

to every school in the area to make a presentation to each child. Many of these children grew up to be lifelong customers.

"Earl was always looking for bargains to buy and pass on the savings to the customers. He bought out bankrupt stores and each time got new lines of merchandise which he found sold well. This way, he continually added new lines until his store got to be a place to completely outfit the entire family.

"When the depression hit in the thirties, he attracted people with local talent, along with movie films he showed. During World War II he filled his show windows with pictures of servicemen.

"In the late forties he was way ahead in the promotion of denim jeans, for he put on a big parade of people on horseback and gave each rider jeans.

"In the fifties and sixties he made walking a popular method of exercise and got publicity in local newspapers – as well as points as far distant as the Soo; Richmond, Indiana; Norton, Virginia and Independence, Missouri. Customers still ask him about his 600 mile walking trips.

"Now Earl's prime activity out of the store is the creation of a history of the area.

"Earl never was a big spender on himself. He constantly put the profits back in the business to make a better store to serve the people better. He has been generous in giving money to good causes, but this is one activity done without thought of promoting his business."

Prominent Wyoming Realtor **Andrew DeKraker** had also been a long standing friend of Earl's over the years, as well as a long time customer. In 1975, he summed up as follows:

"As a real estate broker, I have been located in the Home Acres area for approximately 25 years. During that period I have had many occasions to work intimately with Earl Robson on committees and have dealt with him on a business basis.

"Earl has a very engaging smile, a quick and discerning eye, and is a fine fellow. His business activity has always been oriented toward giving an honest and good deal. His contribution to civie and public affairs has been outstanding, and this, in turn, has contributed to his business success.

"I have learned to appreciate and respect Earl very much over the past 25 years for his integrity, compassion for others, business judgment, and unlimited energy. He has a mind full of ideas and is often in a *new* idea before the last one has been implemented!

"I regard my association with Earl to be one of the better experiences of my life and am certain this feeling is held by many others who count Earl Robson as a friend."

One prominent public official who had known Earl for many years was proud to set down his feelings in October, 1975:

"It has been my good fortune to have known Earl Robson for many years. I have had contact with him on a regular basis both at the business level and the social level. I served with Earl on the Wyoming City Council for five years.

"There is no man, in my opinion, who possesses a higher degree of honesty and integrity than Earl Robson. His contributions to the schools, the churches, and his city have gone a long ways in helping to improve the quality of life that we enjoy in the community, and for this we all owe him our thanks."

— **Mayor Thomas K. Eardley**
City of Wyoming, Michigan